

MINDFULNESS, BLISS, AND BEYOND

A MEDITATOR'S HANDBOOK

AJAHN BRAHM

FOREWORD BY JACK KORNFIELD

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Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond

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A Meditator's Handbook

Ajahn Brahm

foreword by Jack Kornfield



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Foreword



YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS a truly helpful and sophisticated manual of meditation written by a monk with deep and wide-ranging experience. Ajahn Brahm is one of a new generation of Westerners who have studied, practiced, and mastered an important range of Buddhist teachings and now offer them to sincere practitioners across the modern world.

In *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* you will find a thorough set of teachings for developing and deepening meditation, aimed particularly at attaining absorption, or *jhāna samādhi*, and opening to the insights that can follow from it. Ajahn Brahm offers a careful and subtle understanding of how to transform initial difficulties and how to incline the mind toward rapture, happiness, light, and the profound steadiness of *jhāna*. Then he turns this concentrated attention to illuminate the emptiness of self that brings liberating understanding. These are beautiful teachings.

While I acknowledge with pleasure the fruit of Ajahn Brahm's rich experience as a guide for meditators, Ajahn Brahm presents this way of developing *jhāna* and insight as the real true way the Buddha taught and therefore the best way. It is an excellent way. But the Buddha also taught many other equally good ways to meditate and employed many skillful means to help students awaken. The teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Sunlun Sayadaw are among a wide spectrum of masters who offer different and equally liberating perspectives. Together they comprise a rich mandala of living Dharma, of which Ajahn Brahm reveals one important facet.

So, those of you interested in the practice of jhāna and the depths of the Buddhist path: read this book carefully. And try its practices. Much will be gained from its rich and wise words and even more from the experiences it points to. And as the Buddha and Ajahn Brahm both advise, test them out, use them, and learn from them, but do not cling to them. Let them lead you to the liberation beyond all clinging, the sure heart's release. May these teachings bring understanding, benefit, and blessings to all.

With metta,

Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
Woodacre, California
2006

Abbreviations

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Buddhist Texts in Pāli		Numbered by:
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>	division & sutta no.
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>	verse no.
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>	volume & page no. in Pali Text Society (PTS) edition
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>	sutta, section, & verse no. in <i>The Long Discourses of the Buddha</i>
Ja	<i>Jātaka</i>	volume & page no. in PTS edition
Miln	<i>Milindapañha</i>	chapter & dilemma no. in PTS edition
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>	sutta & section no. in <i>The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>	chapter & sutta no.
Sn	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>	verse no.
Th-a	<i>Paramatthadīpanī (Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā)</i>	volume & page no. in PTS edition
Thag	<i>Theragāthā</i>	verse no.
Thig	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	verse no.
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>	chapter & sutta no.
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>	volume, chapter, section, & subsection no. in PTS edition
Vsm	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>	chapter & section no. in <i>The Path of Purification</i>

Acknowledgments

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FIRST, I WISH TO ACKNOWLEDGE Cūlaka Bhikkhu (Dr. Jacob Meddin) who turned his tiny monk's hut into something resembling a third-world sweatshop, working long hours over many months, even though in poor health, to produce the first versions of these instructions for the Buddhist Society of Western Australia's in-house Dhamma Journal. My thanks also go to Ron Storey, who typed out the manuscript so many times that he must now know these teachings by heart, and to Nissarano Bhikkhu, who organized the index. Next, I convey long overdue appreciation to my first meditation teacher, Nai Boonman of the Samatha Society in U.K., who revealed the beauty and importance of jhāna to me while I was till a long-haired student at Cambridge University in 1970. But most of all, I express my infinite gratitude to the teacher under whose instructions I happily lived for nine years in Northeast Thailand, Venerable Ajahn Chah, who not only explained the path to liberation so clearly, but who also lived the path so totally, to the very end.

Last but not least, my thanks go to all at Wisdom Publications, including David, Rod, and my copyeditor John LeRoy, for all their hard work bringing this volume to completion. May their good karma give them good health so that they will be able to work even harder on my next book.

Introduction: The Big Picture



MEDITATION IS *the* way of letting go. In meditation you let go of the complex world outside in order to reach a powerful peace within. In all types of mysticism and in many spiritual traditions, meditation is the path to a pure and empowered mind. The experience of this pure mind, released from the world, is incredibly blissful. It is a bliss better than sex.

In practicing meditation there will be some hard work, especially at the beginning, but if you are persistent, meditation will lead you to some very beautiful and meaningful states. It is a law of nature that without effort one does not make progress. Whether you are a layperson or a monk or nun, without effort you get nowhere.

Effort alone is not sufficient. Effort needs to be skillful. This means directing your energy to just the right places and sustaining it until the task is complete. Skillful effort neither hinders nor disturbs; instead it produces the beautiful peace of deep meditation.

The Goal of Meditation

To know where your effort should be directed in meditation, you must have a clear understanding of the goal. The goal of this meditation is beautiful silence, stillness, and clarity of mind. If you can understand that goal, then the place to apply your effort and the means to achieve the goal become much clearer. The effort is directed to letting go, to developing a mind that inclines to abandoning. One of the many simple but profound statements of the Buddha is that “a meditator who makes letting

go the main object easily achieves *samādhi*,” that is, attentive stillness, the goal of meditation (SN 48,9).¹ Such a meditator gains these states of inner bliss almost automatically. The Buddha was saying that the major cause for attaining deep meditation and reaching these powerful states is the ability to abandon, to let go, to renounce.

Letting Go of Our Burdens

During meditation, we should not develop a mind that accumulates and holds on to things. Instead we should develop a mind that is willing to let go, to give up all burdens. In our ordinary lives we have to carry the burden of many duties, like so many heavy suitcases, but within the period of meditation such baggage is unnecessary. In meditation, unload as much baggage as you can. Think of duties and achievements as heavy weights pressing upon you. Abandon them freely without looking back.

This attitude of mind that inclines to giving up will lead you into deep meditation. Even during the beginning stages of your meditation, see if you can generate the energy of renunciation—the willingness to give things away. As you give things away in your mind, you will feel much lighter and more free. In meditation, abandoning occurs in stages, step by step.

Meditators are like birds that soar through the sky and rise to the peaks. Birds never carry suitcases! Skillful meditators soar free from all their burdens and rise to the beautiful peaks of their minds. It is on such summits of perception that meditators will understand, from their own direct experience, the meaning of what we call “mind.” At the same time they will also understand the nature of what we call “self,” “God,” “the world,” “the universe,” the whole lot. It’s there that they become enlightened—not in the realm of thought, but on the soaring summits of silence within their mind.

The Plan of the Book

Part 1 of this book, “The Happiness of Meditation,” is for those who want to meditate in order to relieve some of the heaviness of life but,

because of obstacles or disinclination, will not pursue meditation into the bliss states and enlightenment. Here I demonstrate that, even for the beginner, meditation when practiced correctly generates considerable happiness. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the first steps of meditation in a clear and systematic way. They are a revised version of a little booklet of mine titled *The Basic Method of Meditation*.² Chapters 3 and 4 identify the problems that can occur in meditation and show how these obstacles, once recognized, are easily overcome. In chapters 5 and 6 I explain mindfulness in a unique way and then extend the meditator's repertoire by presenting three more methods of meditation, all supportive of the path to inner peace. Then in chapters 7 and 8 I bring into play some of the classic teachings of the Buddha, namely, the discourses on *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing) and *satipaṭṭhāna* (focuses of mindfulness), in order to validate the instructions so far and enrich them with the insightful descriptions of the Buddha himself.

The second part, "To Bliss and Beyond," is a guided tour through the world of timeless Buddhist rapture. It describes how meditation literally implodes into the supreme bliss of the jhānas and how such states of letting go lift the veil of our five senses to reveal the awesome world of the mind, the magic inner garden where enlightenment is reached. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 cast open the world of the pure mind with a detailed account of the experience of jhāna, giving precise step-by-step instructions on how to enter these amazing states. Next, chapters 12 and 13 continue the ascent of the peaks of spiritual experience by narrating how insight based on jhāna unlocks the gates to the orchard of wisdom. Then in chapters 14 and 15 I describe how the task of life is brought to a grand finale, giving precise and authentic details on what enlightenment is and how it is achieved.

The conclusion, "Letting Go to the End," is the book's "reentry vehicle" that returns the reader from the otherworldly realms of jhāna and nibbāna back to ordinary life—although not without a final leap toward the unconditioned as a sort of memento of our journey.

How to Use this Book

This book has three purposes. First, it serves as a course in Buddhist meditation. Meditators who read the book carefully and carry out its instructions conscientiously will receive a progressive and complete course in meditation, one ultimately based on the traditions and sometimes even the actual words of the Buddha himself. These profound, time-honored teachings are presented here in a manner that is compatible with Western thought.

Second, this book is a troubleshooting guide. It is structured to help surmount specific problems in practice. If, for example, ill will is an obstruction, the reader can turn to chapter 3, “The Hindrances to Meditation I,” where one finds the advice to practice loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*) to overcome ill will. Other problem-solving advice is less common—even rare and hard to come by. Chapter 5, “The Quality of Mindfulness,” is a good example. The details of how to set up a “gatekeeper” to both monitor and protect your meditation are invaluable instructions.

The third function of this book is to enable readers to explore aspects of Buddhist meditation that they know little about. It provides information that may be hard to find. Chapters 9–12 on the deep states of meditation bliss (*jhāna*) are a good example. Although the *jhānas* are fundamental to the Buddha’s meditation instructions, they are generally not well understood these days.

It was with some trepidation that I sent this book to the publisher. When I began to practice meditation in London during the late 1960s, a visiting Japanese Zen monk told me, “According to the law of karma, anyone who writes a book on Buddhism will spend his or her next seven lifetimes as a donkey!” This had me worried. Whether it is true or not, it is my conviction that anyone who follows the instructions in this book will escape all rebirth, not only rebirth among those with long ears.

In the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36) the Buddha relates, “I considered: . . . ‘Could that [*jhāna*] be the path to enlightenment?’ Then, following on that memory, came the realization, ‘That is the path to enlightenment.’”³

Part 1
The Happiness of Meditation

The Basic Method of Meditation I 1



IN THIS CHAPTER we will cover the four initial stages of meditation. You may wish to go through the initial stages quickly, but be very careful if you do. If you pass through the initial steps too quickly, you may find that the preparatory work has not been completed. It's like trying to build a house on a makeshift foundation—the structure goes up very quickly, but it may come down too soon! You would be wise to spend a lot of time making the groundwork and foundations solid. Then, when you proceed to the higher stories—the bliss states of meditation—they will be stable.

Stage One: Present-Moment Awareness

When I teach meditation, I like to begin at the simple stage of giving up the baggage of past and future. You may think that this is an easy thing to do, but it is not. Abandoning the past means not thinking about your work, your family, your commitments, your responsibilities, your good or bad times in childhood, and so on. You abandon all past experiences by showing no interest in them at all. During meditation you become someone who has no history. You do not think about where you live, where you were born, who your parents were, or what your upbringing was like. All of that history you renounce. In this way, if you are meditating with others, everyone becomes equal—just a meditator. It becomes unimportant whether you are an old hand at meditation or just a beginner.

If we abandon all that history, we are equal and free. We free ourselves

of some of the concerns, perceptions, and thoughts that limit us, that stop us from developing the peace born of letting go. Every part of our history is finally released, even the memory of what happened just a moment ago. Whatever has happened no longer interests us, and we let it go. It no longer reverberates in our mind.

I describe this as developing a mind like a padded cell. When any experience, perception, or thought hits the wall of this cell, it does not bounce back. It just sinks into the padding and stops. The past does not echo in our consciousness. Some people think that if they contemplate the past, they can somehow learn from it and solve their problems. But when we gaze at the past we invariably look through a distorted lens. Whatever we think it was like, in truth it was not quite like that at all! This is why people argue about what happened even a few moments ago.

It is well known to police who investigate traffic accidents that two different eyewitnesses, both completely honest, may give conflicting accounts of the same accident. When we see just how unreliable our memory is, we will not overvalue the past. We can bury it, just as we bury a person who has died. We bury the coffin or cremate the corpse, and it is done with.

Do not linger on the past. Do not keep carrying around coffins full of dead moments. If you do, you weigh yourself down with heavy burdens that do not really belong to you. When you let go of the past, you will be free in the present moment. As for the future—the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations—let that go too. The Buddha once said, “Whatever you think it will be, it will always be something different” (MN 113,21). This future is known by the wise as uncertain, unknown, and unpredictable. It is often useless to anticipate the future, and in meditation it is always a great waste of time.

The Mind Is Wonderful and Strange

When you work with your mind, you find that it is so strange. The mind can do wonderful and unexpected things. Meditators who are having a difficult time achieving a peaceful state of mind sometimes start thinking, “Here we go again, another hour of frustration.” But often something

strange happens: although they are anticipating failure, they reach a very peaceful meditative state.

Recently I heard about a man on his first ten-day retreat. After the first day, he was in such pain that he asked to go home. The teacher said, “Stay one more day and the pain will disappear, I promise.” So he stayed another day, but the pain only got worse. So again he wanted to go home. The teacher repeated his instruction, “Just one more day and the pain will go.” He stayed for a third day, but the pain was even worse. Every evening for each of the first nine days he would go to the teacher and ask to go home. And the teacher would say, “Just one more day and the pain will disappear.” To his complete surprise, on the first sit in the morning of the final day, the pain disappeared and it did not come back. He could sit for long periods with no pain at all. He was amazed at how wonderful this mind is and how it can produce such unexpected results. So you cannot know the future. It can be so strange, so weird, so completely beyond what you would expect. Experiences such as this man’s can give you the wisdom and courage to abandon all thoughts and expectations about the future.

When you think during your meditation, “How many more minutes are there to go? How much longer do I have to endure this?” that is just wandering off into the future. The pain could disappear in a twinkling. You simply cannot anticipate when that is going to happen.

During a retreat you may think that none of your meditations were any good. But in the next meditation session you might sit down and everything becomes so peaceful and easy. “Wow!” you think. “Now I can meditate!” But then the next meditation is as awful as the first ones. What’s going on here?

My first meditation teacher told me something that at the time sounded quite strange. He said that *there is no such thing as a bad meditation*. He was right. All those meditations that you call bad or frustrating are where you do the hard work for your “wages.” It’s like a person who on Monday works all day but gets no money at the end of the day. “What am I doing this for?” he thinks. He works all day Tuesday and still gets nothing. Another bad day. All day Wednesday and Thursday he works, and still nothing to show for it. Four bad days in a row. Then along comes

Friday. He does exactly the same work as before, and at the end of the day the boss gives him his wages. Wow! Why can't every day be a payday?

Why can't every meditation be a payday? Do you understand the simile? During the difficult meditations you build up your credit, the reason for your success. In the hard meditations you build up your strength, which creates the momentum for peace. Then when there is enough credit, the mind goes into a good meditation, and it is a payday. But you must remember that it was in the so-called bad meditations that most of the work was done.

The Past and Future Are Burdens

In one retreat that I gave, during an interview a woman told me that she had been angry with me all day, but for two different reasons. In her early meditations she was having a difficult time and was angry with me for not ringing the bell to end the meditation early enough. In the later meditations she got into beautiful, peaceful states and was angry with me for ringing the bell too soon. The sessions were all the same length, exactly one hour.

When you anticipate the future by thinking, "How many more minutes until the bell rings?" you torture yourself. So be very careful not to pick up the heavy burden of "How many more minutes to go?" or "What should I do next?" If that is what you are thinking, you are not paying attention to what is happening now. You are asking for trouble. You are not doing the meditation.

In this stage of meditation keep your attention right in the present moment, to the point where you don't even know what day it is or what time it is. Morning? afternoon?—don't know! All you know is what moment it is *right now*. In this way, you arrive at this beautiful "monastery time," where you are just meditating in the moment. You're not aware of how many minutes have gone or how many remain. You cannot even remember what day it is.

Once as a young monk in Thailand, I had actually forgotten what year it was! It is marvelous to live in the realm that is timeless, a realm so much more free than the time-driven world we usually live in. In the timeless

realm, you experience *this* moment—just as all wise beings have been experiencing *this* moment for thousands of years. You have arrived at the reality of now.

The reality of now is magnificent and awesome. When you have abandoned all past and all future, it is as if you have come alive. You are here. You are mindful. This is the first stage of meditation, just this mindfulness sustained only in the present. Reaching this stage, you have done a great deal. You have let go of the first burden that stops deep meditation. So it is important to put forth a lot of effort to make this first stage strong, firm, and well established.

Stage Two: Silent Present-Moment Awareness

In the introduction I outlined the goal of this meditation: beautiful silence, stillness, and clarity of mind pregnant with the most profound insights. You have let go of the first burden that stops deep meditation. Now you should proceed to the even more beautiful and truthful silence of the mind.

Silence Means No Commentary

In discussing stage two it is helpful to clarify the difference between experiencing the silent awareness of the present moment and thinking about it. The simile of watching a tennis match on TV helps. You may notice that two matches are occurring simultaneously: the match that you see on the screen and the match that you hear being described by the commentator. The commentary is often biased. If an Australian is playing an American, for example, an Australian sportscaster is likely to provide a very different commentary from an American one. In this simile, watching the TV screen with no commentary stands for silent awareness in meditation, and paying attention to the commentary stands for thinking about it. You should realize that you are much closer to truth when you observe without commentary, when you experience just the silent awareness of the present moment.

Sometimes we assume it is through the inner commentary that we know the world. Actually, that inner speech does not know the world at all. It is the inner speech that spins the delusions that cause suffering. Inner speech causes us to be angry with our enemies and to form dangerous attachments to our loved ones. Inner speech causes all of life's problems. It constructs fear and guilt, anxiety and depression. It builds these illusions as deftly as the skillful actor manipulates the audience to create terror or tears. So if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and, when meditating, consider it more important than any thought.

It is the high value that one gives to one's own thoughts that is the main obstacle to silent awareness. Wisely removing the importance that one gives to thinking, and realizing the greater accuracy of silent awareness, opens the door to inner silence.

An effective way to overcome the inner commentary is to develop a refined present-moment awareness. You watch every moment so closely that you simply don't have the time to comment about what has just happened. A thought is often an opinion on what has just happened: "That was good." "That was gross." "What was that?" All of these comments are about the previous experience. When you are noting or making a comment about an experience that has just passed, you are not paying attention to the experience that has just arrived. You are dealing with old visitors and neglecting the new arrivals.

To develop this metaphor, imagine your mind to be a host at a party, meeting the guests as they come in the door. If one guest comes in and you start talking with this person about this or that, then you are not doing your duty of paying attention to every guest who enters. Since a guest comes in the door every moment, you must greet each one and then immediately greet the next. You cannot afford to engage even in the shortest conversation with any guest, since this would mean missing the one coming in next. In meditation, experiences come one by one through the doors of our senses into the mind. If you greet one experience with mindfulness and then start a conversation with it, you will miss the next experience following right behind.

When you are perfectly in the moment with every experience, with

every guest that comes into your mind, then you simply do not have the space for inner speech. You cannot chatter to yourself because you are completely taken up with mindfully greeting everything just as it arrives. This is refining present-moment awareness to the level that it becomes silent awareness of the present in every moment.

In developing inner silence you are giving up another great burden. It is as if you have been carrying a heavy rucksack on your back for thirty or fifty years continuously, and during that time you have wearily trudged for many, many miles. Now you have had the courage and found the wisdom to take that rucksack off and put it on the ground for a while. You feel so immensely relieved, so light, and so free, now that you are unburdened.

Another useful technique for developing inner silence is recognizing the space between thoughts, or between periods of inner chatter. Attend closely with sharp mindfulness when one thought ends and before another thought begins—*there!* That is silent awareness! It may be only momentary at first, but as you recognize that fleeting silence you become accustomed to it. And as you become accustomed to it, the silence lasts longer. You begin to enjoy the silence, once you have found it at last, and that is why it grows. But remember, silence is shy. If silence hears you talking about her, she vanishes immediately!

Silence Is Delightful

It would be marvelous for each one of us if we could abandon all inner speech and abide in silent awareness of the present moment long enough to realize how delightful it is. Silence is so much more productive of wisdom and clarity than thinking. When one realizes that, silence becomes more attractive and important. The mind inclines toward it, seeks it out constantly, to the point where it engages in the thinking process only if it is really necessary, only if there is some point to it. Once we have realized that most of our thinking is really pointless, that it gets us nowhere and only gives us headaches, we gladly and easily spend much time in inner quiet. This second stage of the meditation, then, is *silent present-moment awareness*. We may want to spend much time developing just these first two stages, because if we can reach this point, we have come

a long way indeed in our meditation. In that silent awareness of “just now,” we experience much peace, joy, and consequent wisdom.

Stage Three: Silent Present-Moment Awareness of the Breath

If we want to go further, then instead of being silently aware of whatever comes into the mind, we choose silent present-moment awareness of just one thing. That one thing can be the experience of breathing, the idea of loving-kindness (*mettā*), a colored circle visualized in the mind (*kaṣiṇa*), or several other less common focal points for awareness. Here I will describe *silent present-moment awareness of the breath*.

Unity versus Diversity

Choosing to fix one’s attention on one thing is letting go of diversity and moving to its opposite, unity. As the mind begins to unify and sustain attention on just one thing, the experience of peace, bliss, and power increases significantly. Here we discover that the diversity of consciousness is another heavy burden. It is like having six telephones on your desk ringing at the same time. Letting go of this diversity and permitting only one telephone (a private line at that) on your desk is such a relief that it generates bliss. The understanding that diversity is a heavy burden is crucial to being able to focus on the breath.

Careful Patience Is the Fastest Way

If you have developed silent awareness of the present moment carefully for long periods of time, then you will find it quite easy to turn that awareness onto the breath and follow that breath from moment to moment without interruption. This is because the two major obstacles to breath meditation have already been overcome. The first of these two obstacles is the mind’s tendency to go off into the past or future, and the second obstacle is inner speech. This is why I teach the two preliminary stages of present-moment awareness and silent present-moment awareness as a solid preparation for deeper meditation on the breath.

It often happens that meditators start breath meditation when their minds are still jumping around between past and future, and when awareness is being drowned out by inner commentary. Without proper preparation they find breath meditation difficult, even impossible, and give up in frustration. They give up because they did not start at the right place. They did not perform the preparatory work before taking up the breath as a focus of their attention. However, if your mind has been well prepared by completing these first two stages, then when you turn to the breath you will be able to sustain your attention on it with ease. If you find it difficult to attend to your breath, this is a sign that you rushed the first two stages. Go back to the preliminary exercises. Careful patience is the fastest way!

It Does Not Matter Where You Watch the Breath

When you focus on the breath, you focus on the experience of the breath happening now. You experience what the breath is doing, whether it is going in, going out, or is in between. Some teachers say to watch the breath at the tip of the nose, some say to watch it at the abdomen, and some say to move it here and then move it there. I have found through experience that it does not matter where you watch the breath. In fact it is best not to locate the breath anywhere. If you locate the breath at the tip of your nose then it becomes “nose awareness,” not breath awareness, and if you locate it at your abdomen then it becomes “abdomen awareness.” Just ask yourself right now: “Am I breathing in or breathing out? How do I know?” There! The experience that tells you what the breath is doing, that is what you focus on. Let go of the concern about where this experience is located. Just focus on the experience itself.

The Tendency to Control Breathing

A common problem at this stage is the tendency to control the breathing, and this makes the breathing uncomfortable. To overcome this difficulty, imagine that you are just a passenger in a car looking through the window at your breath. You are not the driver, nor a backseat driver.

So stop giving orders, let go, and enjoy the ride. Let the breath do the breathing and simply watch.

When you know the breath is going in or going out for about one hundred breaths in a row, not missing one, then you have achieved what I call the third stage of this meditation, which involves sustained attention on the breath. This again is more peaceful and joyful than the previous stage. To go deeper, you aim next for full sustained attention on the breath.

Stage Four: Full Sustained Attention on the Breath

The fourth stage occurs when your attention expands to take in every single moment of the breath. You know the in-breath at the very first moment, when the first sensation of inbreathing arises. Then you observe as those sensations develop gradually through the whole course of one in-breath, not missing even a moment of the in-breath. When that in-breath finishes, you know that moment. You see in your mind that last movement of the in-breath. You then see the next moment as a pause between breaths, and then many more moments of pause until the out-breath begins. You see the first moment of outbreathing and each subsequent sensation as the out-breath evolves, until the out-breath disappears when its function is complete. All this is done in silence and in the present moment.

Getting Out of the Way

You experience every part of each in-breath and out-breath continuously for many hundred breaths in a row. That is why this stage is called full sustained attention on the breath. You cannot reach this stage through force, through holding or gripping. You can attain this degree of stillness only by letting go of everything in the entire universe except for this momentary experience of the breath happening silently. Actually “you” do not reach this stage, the mind does. The mind does the work itself. The mind recognizes this stage to be a very peaceful and pleasant place

to abide, just being alone with the breath. This is where the doer, the major part of one's ego, starts to disappear.

One finds that progress happens effortlessly at this stage of meditation. We just have to get out of the way, let go, and watch it all happen. The mind will automatically incline, if we only let it, toward this very simple, peaceful, and delicious unity of being alone with one thing, just being with the breath in each and every moment. This is the unity of mind, the unity in the moment, the unity in stillness.

The Beginning of the Beautiful Breath

The fourth stage is what I call the “springboard” of meditation, because from it one may dive into the blissful states. When we simply maintain this unity of consciousness by not interfering, the breath will begin to disappear. The breath appears to fade away as the mind focuses instead on what is at the center of the experience of breath, which is awesome peace, freedom, and bliss.

At this stage I introduce the term “beautiful breath.” Here the mind recognizes that this peaceful breath is extraordinarily beautiful. We are aware of this beautiful breath continuously, moment after moment, with no break in the chain of experience. We are aware only of the beautiful breath, without effort and for a very long time.

Now as I will explain further in the next chapter, when the breath disappears, all that is left is “the beautiful.” Disembodied beauty becomes the sole object of the mind. The mind is now taking the mind as its own object. We are no longer aware of the breath, body, thought, sound, or outside world. All that we are aware of is beauty, peace, bliss, light, or whatever our perception will later call it. We are experiencing only beauty, continuously, effortlessly, with *nothing* being beautiful! We have long ago let go of chatter, let go of descriptions and assessments. Here the mind is so still that it cannot say anything. One is just beginning to experience the first flowering of bliss in the mind. That bliss will develop, grow, and become very firm and strong. And then one may enter into those states of meditation called the *jhānas*.

I have described the first four stages of meditation. Each stage must be well developed before going on to the next. Please take a lot of time with these four initial stages, making them all firm and stable before proceeding. You should be able to maintain with ease the fourth stage, full sustained attention on the breath, during every moment of the breath without a single break for two or three hundred breaths in succession. I am not saying you should count the breaths during this stage; I am just giving an indication of the approximate span of time that one should be able to stay in stage four before proceeding further. In meditation, as I indicated earlier, careful patience is the fastest way!

The Basic Method of Meditation II 2



IN THIS CHAPTER we will consider three more advanced stages of meditation: stage five, full sustained attention on the beautiful breath; stage six, experiencing the beautiful nimitta; and stage seven, jhāna.

Stage Five: Full Sustained Attention on the Beautiful Breath

The fifth stage is called *full sustained attention on the beautiful breath*. Often this stage flows naturally and seamlessly from the previous stage. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, when one's full attention rests easily and continuously on the experience of breathing with nothing interrupting the even flow of awareness, the breath calms down. It changes from a coarse, ordinary breath to a very smooth and peaceful "beautiful breath." The mind recognizes this beautiful breath and delights in it. It experiences a deepening of contentment. It is happy just to be watching this beautiful breath, and it does not need to be forced.

Do Nothing

"You" do not do anything. If you try to do something at this stage, you will disturb the whole process. The beauty will be lost. It's like landing on a snake's head in the game of snakes and ladders—you must go back many squares. From this stage of meditation on, the doer has to disappear. You are just a knower, passively observing.

A helpful trick at this stage is to break the inner silence for a moment and gently say to yourself: "calm." That's all. At this stage of the meditation,

the mind is usually so sensitive that just a little nudge causes it to follow the instruction obediently. The breath calms down and the beautiful breath emerges.

When we are passively observing the beautiful breath in the moment, the perception of “in” (breath) or “out” (breath), or the beginning, middle, or end of a breath, should be allowed to disappear. All that remains will be the experience of the beautiful breath happening now. The mind is not concerned with what part of its cycle the breath is in or where in the body it occurs. Here we are simplifying the object of meditation. We are experiencing breath in the moment, stripped of all unnecessary details. We are moving beyond the duality of “in” and “out” and are just aware of a beautiful breath that appears smooth and continuous, hardly changing at all.

Do absolutely nothing and see how smooth, beautiful, and timeless the breath can be. See how calm you can allow it to be. Take time to savor the sweetness of the beautiful breath—ever calmer, ever sweeter.

Only “the Beautiful” Is Left

Soon the breath will disappear, not when you want it to but when there is enough calm, leaving only the sign of “the beautiful.”

A well-known passage from English literature might help clarify the experience of one’s breath disappearing. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*,⁴ Alice is startled to see the Cheshire Cat sitting on a bough of a nearby tree and grinning from ear to ear. Like all the strange creatures in Wonderland, the Cheshire Cat has the eloquence of a politician. Not only does the cat get the better of Alice in the ensuing conversation, but it also suddenly disappears and then, without warning, just as suddenly reappears.

Alice said, “...and I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!”

“All right,” said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice; “but

a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"

This story is an eerily accurate analogy for the meditation experience. Just as the Cheshire Cat disappeared and left only its grin, so the meditator's body and breath disappear, leaving only the beautiful. For Alice, it was the most curious thing she ever saw in all her life. For the meditator it is also strange, to clearly experience a free-floating beauty with nothing to embody it, not even a breath.

The beautiful, or more precisely the sign of the beautiful, is the next stage on this meditation path. The Pāli word for "sign" is *nimitta*. So this next stage is called "experiencing the beautiful *nimitta*."

Stage Six: Experiencing the Beautiful *Nimitta*

This sixth stage is achieved when one lets go of the body, thought, and the five senses (including the awareness of the breath) so completely that only a beautiful mental sign, a *nimitta*, remains.

This pure mental object is a real object in the landscape of the mind (*citta*), and when it appears for the first time, it is extremely strange. One simply has not experienced anything like it before. Nevertheless, the mental activity we call perception searches through its memory bank of life experiences for something even a little bit similar. For most meditators, this disembodied beauty, this mental joy, is perceived as a beautiful light. Some see a white light, some a golden star, some a blue pearl, and so on. But it is not a light. The eyes are closed, and the sight consciousness has long been turned off. It is the mind consciousness freed for the first time from the world of the five senses. It is like the full moon—here standing for the radiant mind, coming out from behind the clouds—here standing for the world of the five senses. It is the mind manifesting—it is not a light, but for most it appears as a light. It is perceived as a light because this imperfect description is the best that perception can offer.

For other meditators, perception chooses to describe this first

appearance of mind in terms of a physical sensation such as intense tranquillity or ecstasy. Again, the body consciousness (that which experiences pleasure and pain, heat and cold, and so on) has long since closed down, so this is not a physical feeling. It is just perceived as being similar to pleasure. Although some meditators experience sensations while others see light, the important fact is that they are all describing the same phenomenon. They all experience the same pure mental object, and these different details are added by their different perceptions.

The Qualities of a Nimitta

One can recognize a nimitta by the following six features: (1) it appears only after the fifth stage of the meditation, after the meditator has been with the beautiful breath for a long time; (2) it appears when the breath disappears; (3) it comes only when the external five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are completely absent; (4) it manifests only in the silent mind, when descriptive thought (inner speech) is totally absent; (5) it is strange but powerfully attractive; and (6) it is a beautifully simple object. I mention these features so that you may distinguish real nimittas from imaginary ones.

Sometimes when the nimitta first arises it may appear dull. In this case, one should immediately go back to the previous stage of the meditation, full sustained attention on the beautiful breath. One has moved to the nimitta too soon. Sometimes the nimitta is bright but unstable, flashing on and off like a lighthouse beacon and then disappearing. This too shows that the meditator has left the beautiful breath too early. One must be able to sustain one's attention on the beautiful breath with ease for a long, long time before the mind is capable of maintaining clear attention on the far more subtle nimitta. So you should train the mind on the beautiful breath. Train it patiently and diligently. Then when it is time to go on to the nimitta, it will be bright, stable, and easy to sustain.

Letting Go

The main reason why the nimitta can appear dull is that the depth of contentment is too shallow. You are still wanting something. Usually you

want the bright nimitta or you want jhāna. Remember—and this is important—jhānas are states of letting go, incredibly deep states of contentment. So give away the hungry mind. Develop contentment on the beautiful breath, and nimittas and jhānas will happen by themselves.

Put another way, the nimitta is unstable because you, the doer, just will not stop interfering. The doer is the controller, the backseat driver, always getting involved where it does not belong and messing everything up. Meditation is a natural process of coming to rest, and it requires you to get out of the way completely. Deep meditation only occurs when you really let go. This means *really* letting go—to the point that the process becomes inaccessible to the doer.

A skillful means to achieve such profound letting go is to deliberately offer a gift of confidence to the nimitta. Very gently interrupt the silence for a moment and whisper, inside your mind, that you are giving complete trust to the nimitta, so that the doer can relinquish all control and just disappear. The mind, represented here by the nimitta before you, will then take over the process as you watch.

You do not need to do anything here, because the intense beauty of the nimitta is more than capable of holding your attention without your assistance. Be careful here not to start asking questions like “What is this?” “Is this jhāna?” “What should I do next?” which all come from the doer trying to get involved again. Questioning disturbs the process. You may assess everything once the journey is over. A good scientist only assesses the experiment at the end, when all the data are in.

There is no need to pay attention to the shape or edges of the nimitta: “Is it round or oval?” “Is the edge clear or fuzzy?” These are all unnecessary queries, which just lead to more diversity, more duality of inside and outside, and more disturbance. Let the mind incline where it wants, which is usually to the center of the nimitta. The center is where the most beautiful part lies, where the light is most brilliant and pure. Let go and just enjoy the ride as the attention gets drawn right into the center, or as the light expands and envelops you totally. Let the mind merge into the bliss. Then let the seventh stage of this path of meditation, the jhāna, occur.

Stage Seven: Jhāna

There are two common obstacles at the door into jhāna: exhilaration and fear. In exhilaration, the mind becomes excited: “Wow, this is it!” If the mind thinks like this, then the jhāna is unlikely to happen. This “wow!” response needs to be subdued in favor of absolute passivity. You can leave all the wows until after emerging from the jhāna, where they properly belong.

The more likely obstacle, though, is fear. Fear arises from the recognition of the sheer power and bliss of the jhāna, or else at the recognition that to go fully inside the jhāna something must be left behind—*you!* The doer is silent before entering the jhāna, but it is still there. Inside the jhāna, however, the doer is completely gone. Only the knower is still functioning. One is fully aware, but all the controls are now beyond reach. One cannot even form a single thought, let alone make a decision. The will is frozen, and this can be scary for beginners, who have never had the experience of being so stripped of control and yet so fully awake. The fear is of surrendering an essential part of one’s identity.

This fear can be overcome through confidence in the Buddha’s teachings, and through recognizing and being drawn to the enticing bliss just ahead. The Buddha often said that this bliss of jhāna should not be feared but should be followed, developed, and practiced often (e.g., *Latukikopama Sutta*, MN 66,21). So before fear arises, offer your full confidence to that bliss, and maintain faith in the Buddha’s teachings and the example of the noble disciples. Trust the Dhamma, the Buddha’s teachings, and let the jhāna warmly embrace you in an effortless, bodiless, ego-less, and blissful experience that will be the most profound of your life. Have the courage to fully relinquish control for a while and experience all this for yourself.

The Qualities of Jhānas

A jhāna will last a long time. It does not deserve to be called jhāna if it lasts only a few minutes. The higher jhānas usually persist for many hours. Once inside, there is no choice. One will emerge from the jhāna only

when the mind is ready to come out, when the accumulated “fuel” of relinquishment is all used up. Each jhāna is such a still and satisfying state of consciousness that its very nature is to persist for a very long time.

Another feature of jhāna is that it occurs only after the nimitta is discerned, as described above. Furthermore, one should know that during any jhāna it is impossible to experience the body (e.g., physical pain), hear a sound from outside, or produce any thought—not even a “good” thought. There is just a clear singleness of perception, an experience of nondual bliss that continues unchanging for a very long time. This is not a trance but a state of heightened awareness. I say this so that you may know for yourself whether what you take to be a jhāna is real or imaginary.

I will give particular attention to the jhāna in chapters 9 through 11.

The Great Vipassanā versus Samatha Debate

Some traditions speak of two types of meditation, insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and calm meditation (*samatha*). In fact the two are indivisible facets of the same process. Calm is the peaceful happiness born of meditation; insight is the clear understanding born of the same meditation. Calm leads to insight and insight leads to calm.

For those who are misled to conceive of all the instructions offered here as “just samatha practice” (calming) without regard to vipassanā (insight), please know that this is neither vipassanā nor samatha. It is called *bhāvanā* (mental development). This method was taught by the Buddha (AN IV,125–27; MN 151,13–19) and repeated in the forest tradition of Northeast Thailand, with which my teacher, Ven. Ajahn Chah, was associated. Ajahn Chah often said that samatha and vipassanā cannot be separated, nor can the pair be developed apart from right view, right thought, right moral conduct, and so forth. Samatha and vipassanā, Ajahn Chah said, are like two sides of one hand. In the original Buddhist tradition they are inseparable. Indeed, to make progress in the seven stages of meditation I have described, the meditator needs an understanding and acceptance of the Buddha’s teachings, and one’s virtue must be pure.

Insight meditation is an inherent part of the method of meditation described so far. In particular, this meditation can produce insight or understanding in three important areas: insight into problems affecting daily happiness, insight into the way of meditation, and insight into the nature of “you.”

Insight into Problems Affecting Daily Happiness

When a problem arises—a death, a sickness, some other type of loss, or even a hurtful argument—it is not only painful but confusing. It is like being lost in dense and dangerous jungle. When one is lost in the forest, one should climb to the top of a tall tree or tower and look for a distant landmark, such as a river or road that leads to safety. Having gained perspective and an overview of the situation, confusion vanishes.

In this simile, the jungle stands for the tangled problems of daily life. Climbing to the top of a tower or tree refers to the practice of meditation, which leads to the calm, cool air where insight or perspective is gained. Thus if you have a heavy problem, do not think about it endlessly. Then you are merely wandering around lost in your jungle. Instead, carefully follow the instructions for the method of meditation described in this chapter and the previous one, and you will leave your problem behind. You will rise above your jungle, and from that vantage point you will gain insight into what is to be done. The answer will appear out of the calm.

Insight into the Way of Meditation

At the end of each meditation session, spend two or three minutes reviewing all that has happened during that session. There is no need to “take notes” (that is, remind oneself to remember) during the meditation, because you will find it easy to remember the important features at the end. Was it peaceful or frustrating? Now ask yourself why. What did you do to experience peace, or what caused the feeling of frustration? If your mind wandered off into fantasy land, was that peaceful and useful? Such reviewing and inquiry *only at the end of the session* generates insight into how to meditate and what meditation is. No one starts out as a perfect meditator.

The insights gained by reviewing your meditation at the end of each session will deepen your experience of meditation and overcome hindrances. Developing this type of insight into your meditation is important, and I will come back to it in part 2.

Suffice it to say at this point that you need insight to achieve each of the stages I have described. To be able to let go of your thoughts, for example, you need some insight into what “letting go” is. The further you develop these stages, the more profound your insight will be. And if you reach as far as *jhāna*, then it will change your whole understanding.

By the way, these insights into the way of meditation also work for problems in daily life. This is because the tendencies that create obstacles in meditation are the same clumsy attitudes that cause difficulties in life. Meditation is like a gym in which you develop the powerful mental muscles of calm and insight, which you then use both in further meditation and in daily life to bring happiness and success.

Insight into the Nature of “You”

The deepest and most elusive insight is into who you really are. This insight is gained not through belief or thinking but only by meditation, by becoming absolutely still, releasing the mind, and then knowing the mind. The Buddha compared the mind to the full moon at night hidden behind clouds. The clouds stand for the activity of the five senses and thought. In deep meditation, the five senses recede to reveal the pure and radiant mind. In *jhāna*, you can actually observe the pure mind.

In order to know the inner secrets of the mind, one must continue to observe it in the stillness of *jhāna*, with no thought at all, for a very long time. One simile tells of a thousand-petaled lotus that closes its petals at night and opens them at dawn. When the first rays of the morning sun warm the outermost row of petals, they begin to open, which allows the sun to warm the next row of petals. Soon those petals open too, and the sun’s warmth falls on the next row, and so on. But if a cloud appears and obscures the sun, then the lotus closes its petals. It takes a long period of unbroken sunshine to warm the lotus enough to open the innermost row of petals and reveal its secrets.

The lotus in this simile stands for the mind; the sun's warmth stands for still attention; and the cloud stands for a thought or mental agitation that destroys the stillness. I shall develop this simile later. For now, let me say that these inner secrets are beyond your imagining. Some meditators stop at an inner row of petals and mistakenly think, "This is it." Then the stillness breaks and the lotus closes in a twinkling. This is false enlightenment. When your meditation is so profound that you can remain in stillness for several hours, observing the mind freed from the hindrances, and watching the innermost row of petals open fully to reveal the jewel in the heart of the lotus, then you will realize the ultimate insight, the truth of who you are. Find out for yourself!

In the previous chapter, I counseled that patience is the fastest way to proceed. This also holds true for the three stages of meditation discussed in this chapter. These are all stages of letting go, each dependent upon the ones preceding. In the end, to enter into *jhāna* one has to really let go. This is a profound letting go made possible by careful and diligent practice.

There is much more to meditation than I have covered so far. In these two chapters only the basic method has been described: seven stages that culminate in the first *jhāna*. Much more needs to be said about the hindrances, qualities of mindfulness, other meditation objects, and more. Let us begin our detailed study by turning our attention to the five hindrances and how they are overcome.

The Hindrances to Meditation I 3



IN THIS CHAPTER and the next I will explain in detail the five hindrances, obstacles that you will meet in your meditation and that you should learn to overcome. These obstacles to deep meditation are called in the Pāli language *nīvarana*. Literally that means “closing a door” or “obstructing entering into something,” and this is exactly what the hindrances do. They stop you from entering into the deep absorption states, or *jhānas*. They also obstruct or weaken wisdom and strengthen delusion. So if one is going to say anything in Buddhism about the enemies to meditation, one can say that the five hindrances are Public Enemy Number One. *They stop people from becoming enlightened*, and it’s precisely for this reason that understanding these five hindrances and overcoming them is crucial. When you don’t fully understand them, you cannot overcome them.

Some teachers fail to explain the hindrances clearly enough, especially the hindrances that are very subtle. These refined hindrances prevent you from getting into deep meditation. If you do not even try to identify them and surpass them, then they will hold sway over your mind. You will be obstructed from enjoying the bliss of the mind and from developing the great insights of enlightenment.

Basically, these five hindrances stand between you and enlightenment. When you know them, you have a good chance of overcoming them. If you have not achieved the *jhānas* yet, it means you have not fully understood these five hindrances. If you have gotten into such deep states, then you have overcome the hindrances. It’s as simple as that.

The Buddha named the five hindrances as follows: sensory desire

(*kāma-cchanda*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). This is the usual order in which the Buddha lists them, and this is the order in which they will be presented here, too.

The First Hindrance—Sensory Desire

Kāma-cchanda, or sensory desire, is first on the list of hindrances because of its importance. It is the major obstacle preventing one from entering deep meditation. Few meditators fully understand its scope. It is not just sensory desire as that term is commonly understood. First of all, the Pāli word *kāma* means anything pertaining to the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. *Chanda* means to delight in or agree with. Together the compound *kāma-cchanda* means “delight, interest, involvement with the world of the five senses.”

For example, when we are meditating and hear a sound, why can't we simply ignore it? Why does it disturb us so? Many years ago in Thailand the local villages surrounding our monastery held a party. The noise from the loudspeakers was so loud that it seemed to destroy the peace in our monastery. So we complained to our teacher, Ajahn Chah, that the noise was disturbing our meditation. The great master replied, “It is not the noise that disturbs you, it is you who disturb the noise!”

In the above example *kāma-cchanda* was the mind getting involved with the sound. Similarly, when your meditation is interrupted by a pain in your legs, say, then it is not the pain that disturbs you but it is you who disturb the pain. If you had been mindful, you would have seen your awareness go out to your body, becoming interested in sensations again. That was *kāma-cchanda* at work.

It is difficult to overcome *kāma-cchanda* because we are so attached to our five senses and their affairs. Whatever we are attached to we find impossible to release. To understand this attachment it is useful to examine the connection between our five senses and our body. It is commonly claimed that the five senses are there to protect our body, but insight will tell you the opposite: that the body is there to provide a vehicle for your

five senses to play in the world. You will also notice that when the five senses disappear so does your body. Letting go of one means letting go of the other.

Abandoning Kāma-cchanda Little by Little

You can't simply decide to let go of the five senses and the body through a single effort of will. The abandoning of kāma-cchanda in meditation is achieved little by little. You start by choosing a comfortable, quiet place in which to meditate. You may sit on a chair if it is more comfortable for you, remembering that even the Buddha sat on a chair sometimes. When you first close your eyes you will be unable to feel much of the body. In the same way that it takes a few minutes to see when you go out from a well-lit room into the dark, so it takes a few minutes to become sensitive to your bodily feelings. Thus the final adjustments to our body posture are made a few minutes after closing our eyes.

Indulging kāma-cchanda in this way will subdue it for a while. Your body will feel comfortable and the five senses satisfied, but not for long. You must use this initial freedom to start placing the mind beyond the reach of the five senses. You begin with present-moment awareness. Most if not all of our past and future is occupied by the affairs of our five senses. Our memories are of physical sensations, tastes, sounds, smells, or sights. Our plans are likewise filled with five-sense business. Through achieving present-moment awareness we cut off much of kāma-cchanda.

The next stage of meditation is silent present-moment awareness. In this you abandon all thought. The Buddha identified an aspect of kāma-cchanda that is called *kāma-vitakka*, meaning thinking about the five-sense world. For the new meditator, the most obvious form of kāma-vitakka is sexual fantasy. One can use up many hours, especially on a long retreat, with this type of kāma-vitakka. This obstacle to progress in meditation is transcended by realizing, through insight or faith, that total freedom from the five senses (i.e., jhāna) is more ecstatic and profound than the very best of sexual experiences. A monk or nun gives up their sexuality not out of fear or repression, but out of recognition of something superior. Even thoughts about lunch belong to kāma-vitakka. They disturb the silence.

And few meditators realize that noting bodily sensations, for example thinking to oneself “breath going in” or “hearing a sound” or “feeling a stabbing pain,” is also part of *kāma-vitakka* and a hindrance to progress.

Lao Tzu, the great Taoist sage, would allow one student to accompany him on his evening walk, as long as the student maintained silence. One evening, as they reached a mountain ridge, the student remarked, “What a beautiful sunset.” Lao Tzu never let that student accompany him again. When others asked why, the master explained, “When that student said, ‘What a beautiful sunset,’ he was no longer watching the sunset, he was only watching the words.” That is why you have to abandon noting, for watching the words is not being mindful of the thing it tries in vain to describe.

In silent present-moment awareness it is as if the world of the five senses is now confined in a cage, unable to roam or create any mischief. Next, in order to abandon the five senses completely and with them the body, you choose to focus your mindfulness on a small part of the five-sense world to the exclusion of the rest. You focus your mindfulness on the physical sensation of the breath, paying no attention to other sensations in your body, nor to sounds and so on. The breath becomes the stepping stone from the world of the five senses over to the realm of the mind.

When you succeed in full sustained attention on the breath you will notice the absence of any sound. You never recognize the moment that hearing stops because its nature is to fade away gradually. Such a fading, like physical death, is a process not an event. Usually you discover when reviewing the meditation at the end of the sitting (as advised in chapter 2) that for a certain period your mind was impervious to any sound. You also notice that your body had disappeared, that you could not feel your hands, nor did you receive any messages from your legs. All that you knew was the feeling of the breath.

Some meditators become alarmed when parts of their body seem to vanish. This shows their strong attachment to their body. This is *kāma-cchanda* at work, hindering progress in their meditation. Usually you

soon become familiar with the fading away of bodily sensations and start to delight in the wonderful tranquillity beyond their reach. It is the freedom and joy born of letting go that repeatedly encourages you to abandon your attachments.

Soon the breath disappears and the awesome nimitta fills your mind. It is only at this stage that you have fully abandoned *kāma-cchanda*, your involvement in the world of the five senses. For when the nimitta is established, all five senses are extinguished, and your body is out of range. The first and major hindrance has now been overcome and it is blissful. You are at the door of the *jhānas*. This is the method for abandoning *kāma-cchanda* little by little. It is why the stages of meditation are taught in this way. As the Buddha said in the *Jātakas* (Ja 4,173) “the more you abandon the five-sense world, the more you experience bliss. If you want to experience complete bliss, then completely abandon the five-sense world.”

The Second Hindrance—Ill Will

The second hindrance, ill will or *vyāpāda*, is also a major obstacle to deep meditation, especially for Western meditators. The usual understanding of this second hindrance is anger toward another person. But that is not the full extent of ill will, because it is more likely to be toward yourself or even toward the meditation object.

Ill Will toward Yourself

Ill will toward yourself can manifest as not allowing yourself to bliss out, become peaceful, or become successful in meditation. There are many people who have very deep guilt complexes. This is mostly a Western trait because of the way that many of us have been brought up.

Ill will toward yourself is something that you should watch out for in meditation. It may be the main hindrance that is stopping you from getting deep into meditation. This problem was pointed out to me quite a few years ago when one of the Western nuns was telling me about her meditation. Often she got very deep in her meditation, almost into

jhānas. She was at the door, she said, and the thing that stopped her was the feeling that she did not deserve this happiness! It was ill will toward herself that stopped her, the reluctance to allow herself bliss. I've seen that in many people since. Sometimes when the meditation gets peaceful, when happiness comes up, we think that there must be something wrong. We have ill will toward ourselves, so we don't permit ourselves to be happy and free.

In the nun's case, she saw very clearly that the only thing between her and jhānas was a subtle form of the hindrance of ill will. She didn't think she deserved so much bliss. *You do deserve so much bliss.* Why should you not? There's nothing against it. There are some kinds of bliss in this world that are illegal. There are others that break the Buddhist precepts, cause disease, or have terrible side effects. But jhānas have no bad side effects, they're not illegal, and the Buddha specifically encouraged them.

If you look very carefully at the way you meditate, you may find that you encounter the hindrance of ill will, but not at that last step before jhānas. You encounter it at some earlier stage of meditation when you do not allow yourself delight. Maybe you prefer to sit through pain rather than enjoy peace and happiness. Perhaps you think that you do not deserve happiness, bliss, and freedom.

An aversion to inner happiness is a sure sign of guilt. When someone is found guilty, punishment usually follows, maybe imposed by a court of law. Guilt and punishment are inseparable in our culture and in our minds. If we feel guilty about something, the next thing we think of is punishing ourselves—denying ourselves some type of pleasure, happiness, or freedom. People in the West just keep on seeking punishment. It's crazy!

Goodwill toward Yourself

To overcome that hindrance do some loving-kindness meditation. Give yourself a break. Say to yourself, "The door to my heart is open to all of me. I allow myself happiness. I allow myself peace. I have goodwill toward myself, enough goodwill to let myself become peaceful and to bliss out on this meditation." If you find it hard to extend loving-kindness toward

yourself, ask why. There may be a deep-seated guilt complex inside, and you still expect punishment. You haven't given yourself unconditional forgiveness.

A beautiful ethic of Buddhism is that it does not matter what anyone else does to you or how long they have done it to you; it doesn't matter how unfair, cruel, or undeserving their treatment has been—you may still forgive them absolutely. I hear people saying that sometimes there are things you cannot forgive. That's not Buddhism! *There's nothing, absolutely nothing, you can't forgive in Buddhism.* Some years ago, a demented man went to a primary school in Scotland and killed many small children. At the religious service after the massacre, a prominent cleric asked God not to forgive this man, arguing that some things you cannot forgive! My heart sank when I heard that a religious leader would not offer forgiveness and show the way to heal people's pain in the aftermath of tragedy.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, you can forgive everything. Your forgiveness is healing. Your forgiveness solves old problems and never creates new ones. But because of ingrained attitudes you may have toward yourself, you cannot forgive yourself. Sometimes the problem is buried deep inside. Sometimes you've forgotten it. You just know there is something inside of you that you feel guilty about, that you can't forgive. You have some reason for denying yourself freedom, *jhāna*, and enlightenment. That ill will toward yourself may be the main reason why your meditation is not successful. Check that one out.

Ill Will toward the Meditation Object

Ill will toward the meditation object is a common problem for people who have been meditating on the breath without much success yet. I say "yet" because it's only a matter of time. *Everyone* will have success if they follow the instructions. But if you haven't succeeded yet, you may have some ill will toward meditation or the meditation object. You may sit down and think, "Oh, here we go again," "This is going to be difficult," "I don't really want to do this," "I have to do this because it's what meditators do," or "I've got to be a good Buddhist, and this is what Buddhists

are supposed to do.” If you start the meditation with ill will toward meditation, doing it but not liking it, then it’s not going to work. You are putting a hindrance in front of yourself straightaway.

I love meditation. I enjoy it so much. Once when I led a meditation retreat I said to my fellow monks upon arriving, “Great, a meditation retreat!” I got up early every morning really looking forward to it. “Wow, I’m on meditation retreat. I don’t have to do all the other stuff that I do in the monastery.” I love meditation so much, and I’ve got so much goodwill toward it that there isn’t the slightest bit of aversion. Basically I’m a “meditation junkie,” and if you’ve got that sort of attitude, then you find that the mind, as the Buddha said, “leaps toward meditation” (AN IX, 41).

I like to use this simile: you are walking down the street when you see a dear old friend on the opposite side of the road. You’ve had such good times together. It doesn’t matter where you are going or what you are supposed to be doing, you can’t help but rush across the street, grab your friend by the hand, and give your friend a hug. “Come for a cup of coffee. I don’t care if I’ll be late for an appointment. It’s such a long time since I’ve seen you. Come on, let’s have some time together.” Meditation is like a dear old friend that you want to spend time with. You’re willing to drop everything else. If I see a meditation a mile away I just run toward it and give it a good old hug and take it for a cup of coffee somewhere. And as for the meditation object, the breath, we’ve had such good times together, my breath and I. We’re the best of mates. If you regard the breath with that sort of goodwill, you can see why it’s so easy to watch the breath in your meditation.

The opposite, of course, is when you know you have to be with this frigging breath and you don’t like it. You’ve had so much difficulty with this breath. You see it coming along on the other side of the street and you think, “Oh my God, here it is again.” You try to duck away and hide behind a lamppost so it doesn’t see you. You just want to escape. Unfortunately people do develop such ill will toward the breath. If it’s not pointed out to them, they will regard meditation as a chore. There’s no happiness in it. It becomes something like going to the gym. “If there’s no pain, then there’s no gain.” You lift weights until it really hurts, because

you think you are going to get somewhere that way. If that's the way you enter meditation, then you've got no hope.

So cultivate goodwill toward the meditation object. Program yourself to delight in this meditation. Think, "Wow! Beautiful! All I've got to do is just sit and do nothing else—nothing to build, no letters to write, no phone calls to make. I just need to sit here and be with my good old friend, my breath." If you can do that you've abandoned the hindrance of ill will, and you've developed the opposite—loving-kindness toward your breath.

I use the following method to overcome any ill will toward my breath. I look upon my breath like a newborn son or daughter. Would you leave your baby at the shopping mall and just forget it? Would you drop it as you're walking on the road? Would you lose sight of it for long? Why is it that we can't keep our attention on the breath? Again this is because we lack kindness toward our breath, we don't delight in it, and we don't appreciate it. If you appreciated your breath as much as your child or someone else who is very, very dear to you and very vulnerable, you would never drop, forget, or abandon it. You would always be mindful of it. But if you have ill will toward the breath, you'll find yourself wandering off and forgetting it. You're trying to lose it, because you don't like it all that much. That's why you lose your meditation object.

To sum up, ill will is a hindrance, and you overcome that hindrance by compassion to all others, forgiveness toward yourself, loving-kindness toward the meditation object, goodwill toward the meditation, and friendship toward the breath. You can have loving-kindness toward silence and the present moment too. When you care for these friends who reside in the mind, you overcome any aversion toward them as meditation objects. *When you have loving-kindness toward the meditation object, you do not need much effort to hold it.* You just love it so much that it becomes effortless to be with.

The Hindrances to Meditation II

4



WE TURN NOW to the remaining three hindrances—sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*)—and then examine what happens when the hindrances are overcome.

The Third Hindrance—Sloth and Torpor

The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. I don't need to describe it in detail, because I'm sure we know it all too well through our experience of meditation. We sit in meditation and don't really know what we are watching, whether it's the present moment, silence, the breath, or whatever. This is because the mind is dull. It's as if there are no lights turned on inside. It's all gray and blurry.

Making Peace with Sloth and Torpor

The most profound and effective way of overcoming sloth and torpor is to make peace with the dullness and stop fighting it! When I was a young monk in the forest monasteries in Thailand and became sleepy during the 3:15 A.M. sitting, I would struggle like hell to overpower the dullness. I would usually fail. But when I did succeed in overcoming my sleepiness, restlessness would replace it. So I would calm down the restlessness and fall back into sloth and torpor. My meditation was like a pendulum swinging between extremes and never finding the middle. It took many years to understand what was going on.

The Buddha advocated investigation, not fighting. So I examined

where my sloth and torpor came from. I had been meditating at 3:15 in the morning, having slept very little, I was malnourished, an English monk in a hot tropical jungle—what would you expect! The dullness was the effect of natural causes. I let go and made peace with my sleepiness. I stopped fighting and let my head droop. Who knows, I might even have snored. When I stopped fighting sloth and torpor it did not last all that long. Moreover, when it passed I was left with peace and not with restlessness. I had found the middle of my pendulum swing and I could observe my breath easily from then on.

Dullness in meditation is the result of a tired mind, usually one that has been overworking. Fighting that dullness makes you even more exhausted. Resting allows the energy to return to the mind. To understand this process, I will now introduce the two halves of the mind: *the knower* and *the doer*. The knower is the passive half of the mind that simply receives information. The doer is the active half that responds with evaluating, thinking, and controlling. The knower and the doer share the same source of mental energy. Thus, when you are doing a lot, when you have a busy lifestyle and are struggling to get on, the doer consumes most of your mental energy, leaving only a pittance for the knower. When the knower is starved of mental energy you experience dullness.

At a retreat I led in Sydney a few years ago, a retreatant arrived late from her high-stress job as an executive in the city. In her first sitting that evening her mind was almost as dead as a corpse. So I gave her my special teaching on how to overcome her sloth and torpor: I told her to rest. For the next three days she slept in until dawn, went back to bed again after breakfast, and had a long nap after lunch. What a brilliant meditator! After three days of no fighting, giving hardly any mental energy to the doer but letting it flow to the knower, her mind brightened up. In another three days she had caught up with the rest of the group in her progress through the stages. By the end of the retreat she was way ahead and one of the star meditators of that retreat.

The most profound and effective way to overcome sloth and torpor is to stop fighting your mind. Stop trying to change things and instead let things be. Make peace not war with sloth and torpor. Then your

mental energy will be freed to flow into the knower, and your sloth and torpor will naturally disappear.

Giving Value to Awareness

Another method for overcoming sloth and torpor is to give more value to awareness. All Buddhist traditions say that human life is valuable and precious, especially a life like this one where you have encountered the Buddha's teachings. Now you have the opportunity to practice. You may not realize how many lifetimes it has taken and how much merit you've had to accumulate just to get where you are now. You've invested lifetimes of good karma to get this close to the Dhamma. Reflecting like this means you will incline less to sloth and torpor and more to bright awareness.

The path of meditation sometimes comes to a fork in the road. The left path leads to sloth and torpor while the right path leads to bright awareness. With experience you will recognize this fork. This is the point in meditation where you can choose between the alley to sloth and torpor or the highway to mindful stillness. Taking the left path you give up both the doer and the knower. Taking the right path you let go of the doer but keep the knower. When you value awareness you will automatically choose the right path of bright awareness.

Sloth and Torpor and Ill Will

Sometimes sloth and torpor is the result of ill will, the second hindrance. When I used to visit Australian prisons to teach meditation, I would often hear the following prison proverb: "an extra hour of sleep is an hour off your sentence." People who don't like where they are will try to escape into dullness. In the same way, meditators who easily get negative will tend to drift into sloth and torpor. Ill will is the problem.

In our monastery in Thailand we would meditate all night once a week. During those all-night sittings, sloth and torpor would regularly conquer me an hour or two after midnight. Since it was my first year as a monk, I reflected that less than twelve months previously I would spend all night at parties, rock concerts, and clubs. I recalled that I never experienced sloth

and torpor when listening to the music of the Doors at 2 A.M. Why? It became clear that when you are enjoying what you are doing then you don't tend to get sloth and torpor, but when you don't like what you are doing then sloth and torpor comes in. I did not like those all-night sits. I thought they were a stupid idea. I did them because I had to. I had ill will, and that was the cause of my sloth and torpor. When I changed my attitude and put joy into the all-night sittings, making them fun, then sloth and torpor rarely came. So you should investigate whether your sloth and torpor is the result of an attitude problem—the attitude of ill will.

Using Fear

When I was a lay Buddhist I attended a Zen retreat in the north of England. It was very early in the morning, and the meditation hall was freezing cold. People had their blankets around them. When you meditate with a blanket anywhere close to you, you tend to get sleepy. The teacher was walking up and down with a big stick, and the fellow next to me who had started nodding got hit. Everyone's sloth and torpor suddenly disappeared right then. We only needed one person to get hit and that was enough. The problem was that the fear that woke me up remained with me, preventing further progress. Experience teaches that you can't generate wholesome states like peace and freedom by using unwholesome methods like fear or violence.

In the old forest tradition of northeast Thailand, monks would meditate in dangerous places such as platforms high in the trees, on the edge of cliffs, or in jungles full of tigers. The ones who survived said they got good meditation, but you never heard from the monks that didn't survive!

The Fourth Hindrance— Restlessness and Remorse

The next hindrance, restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), is among the most subtle of hindrances. The main component of this

hindrance is restlessness of mind. But first let me briefly address the matter of remorse.

Remorse

Remorse is the result of hurtful things that you may have done or said. In other words, it is a result of bad conduct. If any remorse comes up in meditation, instead of dwelling on it, you should forgive yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. The wise are not people who never make mistakes, but those who forgive themselves and learn from their mistakes. Some people have so much remorse that they think they can never become enlightened.

The story of Angulimāla is a well-known story in the Buddhist scriptures (MN 86). Angulimāla was a serial killer. He killed 999 people. He cut off a finger from each of his victims and put them in a garland he hung around his neck. The one-thousandth victim was to be the Buddha but, of course, you can't kill a buddha. Instead the Buddha "killed him," killed his bad ways, killed his defilements. Angulimāla became a Buddhist monk. Even a serial killer like Angulimāla could achieve the jhānas and become fully enlightened. So have you ever killed anybody? Are you a serial killer? You probably haven't done anything like that. If such people can become enlightened, surely you can. No matter what bad things you've done in your past or what you feel remorseful about, always remember Angulimāla. Then you won't feel so bad about yourself. Forgiveness, letting go of the past, is what overcomes remorse.

Restlessness

Restlessness arises because we do not appreciate the beauty of contentment. We do not acknowledge the sheer pleasure of doing nothing. We have a faultfinding mind rather than a mind that appreciates what's already there. *Restlessness in meditation is always a sign of not finding joy in what's here.* Whether we find joy or not depends on the way we train our perception. It's within our power to change the way we look at things. We can look at a glass of water and perceive it as very beautiful, or we can think of it as ordinary. In meditation, we can see the breath as dull

and routine, or we can see it as very beautiful and unique. If we look upon the breath as something of great value, then we won't get restless. We won't go around looking for something else. That's what restlessness is, going around looking for something else to do, something else to think about, somewhere else to go—anywhere but here and now. Restlessness is one of the major hindrances, along with sensory desire. Restlessness makes it so hard to sit still for very long.

I begin meditation with present-moment awareness, just to overcome the coarse restlessness that says, "I want to be somewhere other than right here, right now." No matter what this place is, no matter how comfortable you make it, restlessness will always say it's not good enough. It looks at your meditation cushion and says it's too big or too small, too hard or too wide. It looks upon a meditation retreat center and says, "It's not good enough. We should have three meals a day. We should have room service."

Contentment is the opposite of a faultfinding mind. You should develop the perception of contentment with whatever you have, wherever you are, as much as you can.

Beware of finding fault in your meditation. Sometimes you may think, "I'm not going deep enough. I've been watching the present moment for so long, and I'm not getting anywhere." That thought is the very cause of restlessness. It doesn't matter how the meditation is going in your opinion. Be absolutely content with it and it will go deeper. If you're dissatisfied with your progress, then you're only making it worse. So learn to be content with the present moment. Forget about *jhānas*, just be content to be here and now, in this moment. As that contentment deepens, it will actually give rise to *jhānas*.

Watch the silence and be content to be silent. If you're truly content, you don't need to say anything. Don't most inner conversations take the form of complaining, attempting to change things, or wanting to do something else? Or escaping into the world of thoughts and ideas? Thinking indicates a lack of contentment. If you're truly contented, then you're still and quiet. See if you can deepen your contentment, because it is the antidote for restlessness.

Even if you have an ache in the body and don't feel well, you can change your perception and regard that as something quite fascinating, even beautiful. See if you can be content with the ache or pain. See if you can allow it to be. A few times during my life as a monk I have been in quite severe pain. Instead of trying to escape, which is restlessness, I turned my mind around to completely accept the pain and be content with it. I have found that it is possible to be content with even severe pain. If you can do that, the worst part of the pain disappears along with the restlessness. There's no wanting to get rid of it. You're completely still with the feeling. The restlessness that accompanies pain is probably the worst part. Get rid of restlessness through contentment, and you can even have fun with pain.

Develop contentment with whatever you have—the present moment, the silence, the breath. Wherever you are, develop that contentment, and from that contentment—out of the very center of that contentment—you'll find your meditation will deepen. So if you ever see restlessness in your mind, remember the word *contentment*. Contentment looks for what is right, and it can keep you still. But restlessness will always make you a slave. There is a simile that the Buddha used (MN 39,14). Restlessness is like having a tyrannical master or mistress always telling you: “Go and get this,” “Go and do that,” “That's not right,” “Clean that up better,” and never giving you a moment of rest. That tyrant is the faultfinding mind. Subdue this tyrant through contentment.

After you've overcome the more general forms of restlessness, a very refined form often occurs at the deeper stages of meditation. I am referring to the time when you first see a *nimitta*. Because of restlessness, you just can't leave it alone. You mess around with it. You aren't content with the *nimitta* as it appears right now. You want something more. You get excited. Restlessness is one of the hindrances that can easily destroy the *nimitta*. You've arrived already. You don't have to do any more. Just leave it alone. Be content with it and it will develop by itself. That's what contentment is—complete nondoing, just sitting there watching a *nimitta* blossom into a *jhāna*. If it takes an hour, if it takes five minutes, if it never even happens, you're content. That's the way to get into *jhānas*. If the

nimitta comes and goes, that's a sign of restlessness in the mind. If you can sustain attention effortlessly, restlessness has been overcome.

The Fifth Hindrance—Doubt

The last of the hindrances is called doubt (*vicikicchā*). Doubt can be toward the teaching, about the teacher, or toward yourself.

Regarding doubt toward the teaching, you should have enough confidence by now to know that some beautiful results come from practicing meditation. You may have experienced many of them already. Allow those positive experiences to strengthen your confidence that meditation is worthwhile. Sitting in meditation, developing the mind in stillness, and especially developing the mind in *jhānas* are all tremendously worthwhile and will give you clarity, happiness, and understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

With regard to teachers, they are often like coaches of sports teams. Their job is to teach from their own experience and, more important, to inspire students with words and deeds. But before you put your confidence in a teacher, check them out. Observe their behavior and see for yourself if they are practicing what they preach. If they really know what they are talking about, then they will be ethical, restrained, and inspiring. Only if teachers lead by example—a good example, that is—should you place your confidence in them.

Self-doubt—which thinks, “I’m hopeless, I can’t do this, I’m useless, I’m sure everyone else who practices meditation, except me, has got *jhānas* and is already enlightened”—is often overcome with the help of a teacher who inspires and encourages you. It’s the teacher’s job to say, “Yes, you can achieve all of these things. Many other people have achieved them, so why not you?” Give yourself encouragement. Have confidence that you can achieve whatever you want. In fact, if you have sufficient determination and confidence, then it’s only a matter of time before you succeed. The only people who fail are those who give up.

Doubt can also be directed toward what you are experiencing now: “What is this? Is this *jhāna*? Is this present-moment awareness?” Such

doubts are hindrances. They are inappropriate during meditation. Just make the mind as peaceful as you can. Let go and enjoy the peace and happiness. Afterward, you can review the meditation and ask, “What was that? That was really interesting. What was happening there?” That’s when you’ll find out whether or not it was a *jhāna*. If while meditating the thought “Is this *jhāna*?” arises, then it cannot be *jhāna*! Thoughts like that can’t come up within these deep states of stillness. Only afterward, when you review those states, can you look back and say, “Ah, that was a *jhāna*.”

If you get into any difficulty in your meditation, stop and ask yourself, “Which of the hindrances is this?” Find out what the cause is. Once you know the cause, then you can remember the solution and apply it. If it’s sensory desire, just take the attention away from the five senses little by little and apply it to the breath or the mind. If it’s ill will, do some loving-kindness. For sloth and torpor, remember “give value to awareness.” If it’s restlessness and remorse, remember “contentment, contentment, contentment” or practice forgiveness. And if it’s doubt, be confident and be inspired by the teachings. Whenever you meditate, apply the solutions methodically. That way, the obstacles you experience won’t create long-term barriers. They’re things that you can recognize, overcome, and move beyond.

The Workshop of the Hindrances

Having discussed the five hindrances separately, I will now point out that they all emanate from a single source. They are generated by the control freak inside of you that refuses to let things go.

Meditators fail to overcome the hindrances because they look for them in the wrong place. It is crucial to success in meditation to understand that the hindrances are to be seen at work in the space between the knower and the known. The hindrances’ source is the doer, their result is lack of progress, but their workshop is the space between the mind and its meditation object. Essentially, the five hindrances are a relationship problem.

Skillful meditators observing their breath also pay attention to *how* they watch their breath. If you see expectation between you and your breath, then you are watching the breath with desire, part of the first hindrance. If you notice aggression in the space in between, then you are watching the breath with the second hindrance, ill will. Or if you recognize fear in that space, maybe anxiety about losing awareness of the breath, then you are meditating with a combination of hindrances. For a time you may appear to be successful, able to keep the breath in mind for several minutes, but you will find that you are blocked from going deeper. You have been watching the wrong thing. Your main task in meditation is to notice these hindrances and knock them out. Thereby you earn each successive stage in meditation, rather than trying to steal the prize of each stage by an act of will.

In every stage of this meditation you cannot go wrong when you put peace or kindness in the space between you and whatever you are aware of. When a sexual fantasy is occurring, put peace in the space and the daydream will soon run out of fuel. Make peace not war with the dullness. Place kindness between the observer and your aching body. And agree to a ceasefire in the battle between you and your wandering mind. Stop controlling and start to let go.

Just as a house is built of thousands of bricks laid one by one, so the house of peace (i.e., *jhāna*) is built of thousands of moments of peace made one by one. When moment after moment you place peace or gentleness or kindness in the space between, then the sexual fantasies are no longer needed, pain fades away, dullness turns to brightness, restlessness runs out of gas, and *jhāna* simply happens.

In summary, notice that the five hindrances occur in the space between the observer and the observed. So place peace and loving-kindness in that space. Don't just be mindful, but develop what I call *unconditional mindfulness*, the awareness that never controls or even interferes with whatever it knows. Then all the hindrances will be undermined and soon fade.

The Simile of the Snake

Many meditators complain of a pet hindrance, a problem in meditation

that blocks them again and again. Recurring hindrances can be overcome using a method derived from the following simile of the snake.

In my early years as a forest monk in Thailand, I would often return to my hut late at night barefoot because there weren't any sandals, and I would use the light of the stars to guide me because there were no batteries for my flashlight. Though the jungle paths were shared with many snakes, I never got bitten. I knew they were there in great numbers and that they were very dangerous, so I walked very carefully on the lookout for them. If I saw a suspicious dark band on the path, though it could have been a stick, I would leap over it or else go by another route. Thus I successfully avoided the danger.

In the same way, on the path of meditation there are many dangerous hindrances waiting to grab you and disable your progress. If you would only remember that they are prowling and that they are dangerous, then you would be on the lookout for them and never get caught.

Your pet hindrance is like the most abundant species of snake, one that has caught you many times already. So at the beginning of each sitting remind yourself of that pet hindrance. Alert yourself to its danger. Then you will be on the lookout for it, in the space between the knower and the known, throughout your meditation sitting. Using this method you'll rarely get caught.

The Nālāgiri Strategy

Some meditators claim to experience all the five hindrances at once and in great force! At the time they think they might go crazy. To help such meditators with their acute and intense attack of all hindrances, I teach the Nālāgiri Strategy based on a well-known episode from the life of the Buddha.

Enemies tried to kill the Buddha by releasing an intoxicated bull elephant named Nālāgiri in the narrow street where the Buddha was walking for alms. Those who saw the mad elephant charging shouted warnings to the Buddha and his following of monks to quickly get out of the way. All the monks fled except for the Buddha and his faithful attendant Ven. Ānanda. Ānanda bravely moved in front of his master,

ready to protect his beloved teacher by sacrificing his own life. Gently the Buddha pushed Ven. Ānanda to the side and faced the immensely powerful charging elephant alone. The Buddha certainly possessed psychic powers, and I believe he could have grabbed the great elephant by the trunk, twirled him three times in the air above his head, and thrown him over the river Ganges hundreds of miles away! But that is not the way of a buddha. Instead he used loving-kindness/letting go. Perhaps the Buddha thought something like “Dear Nālāgiri, the door of my heart is open to you no matter what you ever do to me. You may swat me with your trunk or crush me under your feet, but I will give you no ill will. I will love you unconditionally.” The Buddha gently placed peace in the space between him and the dangerous elephant. Such is the irresistible power of authentic loving-kindness/letting go that in a few seconds the elephant’s rage had subsided, and Nālāgiri was meekly bowing before the Compassionate One, having his trunk gently stroked “There Nālāgiri, there...”

There are times in some meditators’ practice when their mind is as crazy as an intoxicated bull elephant charging around smashing everything. In such situations please remember the Nālāgiri Strategy. Don’t use force to subdue your raging bull elephant of a mind. Instead use loving-kindness/letting go: “Dear crazy mind of mine, the door of my heart is fully open to you no matter what you ever do to me. You may destroy or crush me, but I will give you no ill will. I love you, my mind, no matter what you ever do.” Make peace with your crazy mind instead of fighting it. Such is the power of authentic loving-kindness/letting go that in a surprisingly short time, the mind will be released from its rage and stand meekly before you as your soft mindfulness gently strokes it “There mind, there...”

When the Hindrances Are Knocked Out

The question often arises as to how long the hindrances remain knocked out. When they are overcome, does that mean forever or just during your meditation?

At first, you overcome them temporarily. When you emerge from a deep meditation, you'll notice that those hindrances have been gone for a long time. The mind is very sharp, very still. You can keep your attention on one thing for a long time, and you have no ill will at all. You can't get angry with someone even if they hit you over the head. You aren't interested in sensory pleasures like sex. This is the result of good meditation. But after a while, depending on the depth and the length of that meditation, the hindrances come back again. It's like they're in the boxing ring and they've just been knocked out. They are "unconscious" for a while. Eventually they come round again and start playing their tricks. But at least you know what it is like to have overcome those hindrances. The more you return to those deep stages—the more often the hindrances get knocked out—the more sickly and weak they become. Then it's the job of the enlightenment insights to overcome those weakened hindrances once and for all. This is the age-old path of Buddhism. You knock out the five hindrances through meditation practice in order to provide an opportunity for wisdom. Wisdom will then see through these weakened hindrances and destroy them. *When the hindrances have been completely abandoned, you're enlightened.* And if you are enlightened, there is no difficulty in getting into jhānas because the obstacles are gone. What was between you and jhānas has been completely eradicated.



